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AUTHOR	Smith, Cindra
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the roles and responsibilities of student trustees in California Community Colleges from two perspectives, that of a student representative and that of a trustee member of the governing board. The different views reflect different assumptions about the student trustee position. The concerns expressed include frustration about limits on the student trustee role, disagreements over whether or not the student trustee is a representative of or advocate for the student body, disagreements over the extent to which the student trustee is considered to be a regular member of the board, the ability of the student to productively contribute to the board, and the time and support that should be devoted to the student trustee position. Student trustees have been members of local community college governing boards since 1977. The students in a district select student members in accordance with procedures prescribed by the governing board. Boards, as well as college administrators, establish the environment and expectations for student trustees. The report concludes with the assertion that in order to create and sustain an environment in which student trustees can be effective, it is important that districts clarify and make public their expectations and provide appropriate support. (RC)

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Perspectives on the Role of Student Trustees in California Community Colleges

ED 477 917

Student trustees have been members of local community college governing boards since 1977. Local governing boards determine their privileges and establish procedures to elect student trustees. Boards, as well as college administrators, establish the environment and expectations for student trustees.

This paper explores the roles and responsibilities of student trustees from two different perspectives or points of view. It is intended to promote discussion among trustees, associated student representatives (A. S.), and college administrators to help clarify expectations of student trustees and the role they play. It was developed by the League's Advisory Committee on Education Services in response to concerns about differing assumptions about the role of student trustees on the board.

The concerns expressed include frustration about limits on the student trustee role, disagreements over whether or not the student trustee is a representative of or advocate for the student body, disagreements over the extent to which the student trustee is considered to be a regular member of the board, the ability of the student to productively contribute to the board, and the time and support that should be devoted to the student trustee position.

Frustration, lack of clarity, and differences of opinion about student trustees' roles and responsibilities reduce their potential effectiveness as members of the board. Student trustee effectiveness may be enhanced if assumptions and expectations about the role are explored, clarified, and made public, and if related practices and the support provided to the student trustees are aligned with the expectations for their role.

Background: Student Roles in Governance

In 1977, the student trustee seat on local governing boards was established in law. The California Education Code (Section 72023.5) reads:

TC030359

"The governing board of each community college district shall order the inclusion within the membership of the governing board, in addition to the number of members otherwise prescribed, one or more nonvoting students who are residents of the district. These students shall have the right to attend each and all meetings of the governing board, except . . . executive sessions."

The nonvoting student member shall be seated with the members of the governing board and shall be recognized as a full member of the board at the meetings, receiving all materials presented to the board members and participating in the questioning of witnesses and the discussion of issues."

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The students in a district select student members in accordance with procedures prescribed by the governing board. A 1999 survey indicates that in 50 districts, the student body elects the person directly; in 13 districts the student body president, vice president or designee is also the student trustee; and in eight districts the person is selected by other methods.

AB 1725 charged the Board of Governors to develop, in cooperation with district and student representatives, a plan for encouraging greater student participation in appropriate aspects of campus, district, and systemwide governance. The ensuing regulations identified the associated student organization (or its equivalent) as the representative body to offer opinions and to make recommendations to the college administration and governing board with regard to policies and procedures that have a significant effect on students.

Two Perspectives on the Student Trustee Role

There are two general perspectives on the role of the student trustee in local governance. One emphasizes the "student" nature of the role; the other emphasizes the "trustee" aspect of the position. The different views reflect different assumptions about the role and person's responsibilities. The perspectives are not necessarily exclusive; student trustees may find themselves integrating, balancing, or being torn between two different sets of expectations.

Perspective One: Representative of the Students

The first perspective is that the student trustee represents the students currently enrolled in the district. The student trustee is considered to be the voice of the students, based on the fact that the students select the trustee. This perspective predates the Associated Students designation in AB1725 as the official voice of the students in shared governance.

The California Student Association of the Community Colleges (CalSACC) affirmed this perspective in a 1991 resolution when it stated that "the purpose of the Student Trustee position is to represent the students as a member of the district Governing Board and to represent a cross-section of the students' views to the Board at all meetings."

In this perspective, both the student trustee and the associated student body organization have the responsibility to be the voice of students in the governance of the district. The A.S. has the responsibility in deliberations within the shared governance structure, including the board, to the extent provided for in local policy. The student trustee is the voice of the students in deliberations of the governing board. The student trustees' participation in those deliberations may be limited to topics in which there is an advocacy role for students.

The joint responsibility implies that the A. S. and the student trustee should work closely together and their roles be clearly defined to ensure cooperation and delineation of functions. In multi-college districts, student trustees may be expected to meet with the Associated Students or other student groups in all colleges in the district. Administrative support for the student trustee would likely be the responsibility of the same office that advises the district Associated Students.

The limitations of this perspective include its constituency-based view of the member of the board. It minimizes adherence to the principle that all members of the governing board have a responsibility to consider the greater good of the institution and the community in their deliberations. (Effective boards and trustees recognize that individual trustees do not represent any one constituency, whether or not the person received support from or was elected by a particular area or group. Instead, effective boards take into account and integrate multiple interests in their communities in making their decisions.)

Inherent in the limited, constituency-based view, this perspective allows the student trustee to be viewed as not a "real" member of the board. Privileges granted to and support for the student trustee would likely be limited.

Strengths of this perspective include that it provides two avenues for official student input into college and district governance. It reinforces the advocacy power of the student trustee as a representative of the clientele of the institution. It reflects the difference between how the student trustee becomes a member of the governing board and how other members are elected.

Perspective Two:
Trustee Member of the Governing Board

The second perspective emphasizes the responsibilities of the student trustee as a full member of the board. Student trustees are considered to have the same responsibility to deliberate for the good of the district as a whole as do other trustees. The common good, aggregate interests, and the future direction and needs of the students and community become the primary considerations in decision-making.

In this view, the purpose of the student trustee seat is to ensure that a board member with a student perspective is part of the deliberations of the governing board. It ensures that a member of the group that uses college services and programs has an official voice. However, in this perspective, the student member is not on the board to be an agent for the current student body.

This second perspective requires that student trustees are held to the same high standards of trusteeship, including participation and preparation, as are all trustees. They are valued as "real" members of the board and their role and contributions assume more importance than they might otherwise.

Limitations of this perspective include its inconsistency with the limited selection process and the year-length term. Those factors make it difficult to expect the student trustee to have the same responsibilities as trustees who are elected in general elections. It is unfair to expect student trustees to contribute at the same level as other trustees, since they are elected for only one year. Their primary responsibility is to be a successful student, which may prevent them from being able to fully participate as a trustee.

In addition, since by law they cannot vote, they do not have the power or authority of other trustees, and therefore it is inconsistent to consider that they are the same as other trustees. Since they cannot vote, the only role they have is one of influence.

One strength of this perspective is that it is aligned with principles of effective trusteeship, which include that the trustee role should not be limited to being an agent for constituent groups or specific electorates or areas. Another strength is that the perspective also helps differentiate the responsibilities of the student trustee and the Associated Students in local governance. Student trustees play a profoundly different role than being advocates or representatives of that particular group.

The League's approach to student trustees reflects this perspective. For the most part, the same materials are used in the Student Trustee Workshop to describe governing board responsibilities and the role of individual trustees as those that are used in the Trustee Orientation Workshop for all new trustees. The presentations emphasize stewardship for the larger community and future students, as well as boardsmanship responsibilities and skills. The workshop encourages student trustees to adopt principles of good trusteeship.

Comparison of the Two Perspectives

The chart below compares and summarizes a number of assumptions and implications related to each perspective. However, expectations and practices in any one district do not necessarily reflect only one or the other perspective. They are often an amalgamation of approaches resulting from the evolution of the role of the student trustee in the district.

Arena	Perspective One:	Perspective Two:
Role of Associated Student	Both A. S. and the student trustee	The Associated Student government
Relationship with A.S.	Close working relationship. In	Student trustees and A.S.
Expectations for Involvement	Attend regular board meetings.	Same expectations for participation
Contact Point	Likely the same advisor as the A.S.	Superintendent or chancellor (the
Point of View	Immediate and operational issues on	Long range and broad on behalf of

		community.
Orientation and Training for the Position	Focus on internal, student-oriented issues. Orientation and major sources of information are the A.S., other students, and administration.	Focus on both internal and external trends and issues. Orientation and sources of information are the same as for all board members.
Rights and Privileges	Likely to be limited to the rights provided for in law.	Privileges are likely to be granted as far as law allows; has an advisory vote.
Financial Support	Funds for travel and board related responsibilities likely come from A. S. funds and may be limited.	Same support as other trustees receive.
Multi-College Districts	May have a student trustee from each college in the district who is expected to represent the college	Would likely have one student trustee.

Again, the two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive nor are policies and practices necessarily aligned with one perspective or the other in any one district. Policies and practices often have been adopted as a result of board philosophy, experiences with individual student trustees, proposals from the Associated Students, and administrative and organizational needs. They reflect the various perspectives of the people or groups proposing or implementing the policy or practice.

Blending or alternating between the perspectives can and does work in some districts, as long as the rationale for each practice or policy is understood and supported by the parties involved. However, confusion and disagreements can and do result from differences and clashes between perspectives. One or more of the parties (the student trustee, governing board, A. S., CEO, or student affairs personnel) may make and act on assumptions about the role that are different than those of the other parties. The resulting discussion may require problem-solving time and energy. Confusion and disagreement can reduce the effectiveness of the student trustee role, no matter how the role is defined.

Conclusion

Student trustees have a unique responsibility to balance many demands and expectations during their relatively short time as board members. They can and do make valuable and consistent contributions to their boards either as student representatives or as trustee members of the board. Alternatively, they may find the responsibilities to be too overwhelming and/or the expectations for their role too conflicting, and sporadic participation and contributions may result.

Therefore, to help create and sustain an environment in which student trustees can be effective, it is important that districts clarify and make public their expectations and provide the appropriate support necessary for student trustees to carry out their responsibilities.

This paper is designed to be a resource to help local districts engage in discussion about the student trustee role. Local governing boards may wish to use this paper to review their assumptions about the student trustee role and responsibilities and to explore their assumptions with the Associated Students, the CEO and other college staff, as appropriate. The assumptions and perspectives about the role may then be compared with policies and practices related to student trustees. This process enables boards to ensure that policy and practice reflect their perspective and assumptions about the role.

This paper is also used in the League's Student Trustee Workshop to explore the different perspectives. While the workshop covers the roles and responsibilities of governing boards, the presentations emphasize that local districts determine the policies and practices that define the role and responsibilities of student trustees.

CCCT Action

The California Community College Trustees board of directors clearly recognizes that each local board must evaluate and assess its own district needs and establish policies that reflect local history, traditions, demographics, and needs.

However, the CCCT board supports Perspective Two and urges serious consideration by all local boards to establish policies that ensure the student trustee can fulfill the role as a member of the board with a student perspective rather than as a representative of student government.

Developed by:
Advisory Committee on Education Services
Principal Author: Cindra Smith, Director of Education Services
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